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FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9849
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1086
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HONG KONG 004780

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/EX
STATE FOR EAP/CM CITRON, PENG
STATE FOR EAP/EP TWANG
STATE FOR INR/EAP AND OES
STATE FOR G/AIAG
STATE FOR M/MED AND M/MEDEX PETER WOOD
HHS FOR OGHA - STEIGER, ELVANDER, BHAT
BANGKOK FOR RMO, CDC
STATE PLEASE PASS TO USDA FOR DU/US LAMBERT
BEIJING FOR DSELIGSOHN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [AMED](#) [KFLU](#) [HK](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: HONG KONG AVIAN INFLUENZA UPDATE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In late December, the Hong Kong government (HKG) will submit a revised paper on Hong Kong,s Avian Influenza (AI) preparations to the Hong Kong Legislative Council (Legco). Bonnie Yau, Assistant Secretary responsible for AI at the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB), provided Econoff an advance overview of the paper in which she stated that Hong Kong has a four-pronged strategy to respond to the AI threat during the upcoming migratory bird season: 1) limiting contact between humans and poultry, and between poultry and wild birds, 2) early detection in animal and human populations, 3) improved preparedness and response to a regional or global pandemic, and 4) increased collaboration with mainland China, Macau and international health agencies.

¶2. (SBU) Bonnie Yau, Assistant Secretary (Health), at the Health, Welfare and Food Department, told Econoff that the HKG is preparing for the annual rise in migratory bird arrivals that usually occurs in January/February and increases the risk of an AI outbreak in Southern China. Yau said that Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China have stepped up monitoring and collaboration efforts to respond to a possible outbreak.

Limited Contact of Poultry with Humans and Migratory Birds

¶3. (SBU) Yau stated that Hong Kong has achieved significant results in reducing the AI threat. The Hong Kong government,s (HKG) &voluntary surrender scheme8 for poultry farmers, wholesalers, and retailers has successfully reduced both the farm poultry population and the number of live chicken sellers in Hong Kong. Under this program, 146 farmers have surrendered operating licenses for cash. Subsequently, Hong Kong,s farm poultry population dropped from approximately 4 million to 1.7 million birds. The number of live poultry wholesalers has also dropped from 86 to 70, while 348 out of 814 live poultry retailers have ceased operations. These reductions allow the HKG to reallocate resources to increase monitoring and hygiene inspection at remaining farms and sales outlets.

¶4. (U) The HKG increased biosecurity measures. It requires farms to &bird proof8 poultry areas to prevent interaction and infection between farm stocks and wild birds. It also mandates full vaccination of all poultry stocks in Hong Kong, implements strong import controls for chickens from mainland China, and increases inspections of mainland farms by HKG officials. In addition, wholesale and retail markets have strict measures to mitigate the AI threat. All market vehicles, cages, and sales areas undergo daily disinfection; the number of chickens allowed in each cage has been limited to prevent overcrowding; all markets also must cease operations twice each month for thorough cleaning and inspection.

¶5. (U) In February 2006, the HKG banned the keeping of backyard poultry with hefty fines of up to HK\$100,000 (approx. US\$13,000). However, Hong Kong has allowed a limited number of exemptions (31) for people who owned pet chickens, geese, ducks or pigeons before the ban.

Early Detection and Prevention

¶6. (U) As part of its ongoing surveillance and testing program, the HKG regularly tests bird samples from wholesale markets, pet bird shops, and imported bird suppliers with approximately 600 birds tested randomly per month. Imported chickens are tested both for the H5N1 virus as well as for the effectiveness of vaccines. Since implementing this program in 2004, 130,000 live poultry have been tested. All tests have been negative for H5N1. The HKG also opened a hotline for the general public to report sick or dead wild birds. Through this program, Agriculture, Fisheries and

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Conservation Department (AFCD) workers collected and tested approximately 11,000 birds, of which only 17 were found to contain an AI virus. To limit the potential for human infection, the HKG also has drawn up plans to close local nature reserves if a bird is found to be infected within a three-kilometer radius of the reserve.

¶7. (U) Three entities (Center for Health Protection and two hospitals) have been identified as testing laboratories for all suspected AI cases. Three additional hospitals are capable of conducting rapid tests. Due to Hong Kong,s role as a WHO testing center, the Center for Health Protection (CHP) collaborates with other laboratories around the world to monitor avian influenza outside of the region.

AI Preparedness and Response

¶8. (SBU) Hong Kong is stockpiling anti-virals (Tamiflu) as part of its preparedness plan. Hong Kong) through the Department of Health and Hospital Authority) currently has 14 million doses and expects to reach its target of 20 million doses in 2007. The HKG is also looking into building commercial vaccine production facilities in Hong Kong. These facilities would produce normal influenza vaccines, but could be converted to produce anti-virals and other drugs necessary during an AI outbreak.

¶9. (U) Hong Kong regularly conducts interdepartmental preparedness and response drills. The Department of Health conducted an AI drill in September 2006 that involved the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB), the Hospital Authority, and Fire Services Department. AFCD and the Department of Health had a poultry culling drill in October 2006, while the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) organized another culling exercise in December 2006. Yau stated that these drills are essential to remind emergency response workers of proper infection control techniques during a possible human or animal outbreak. The

Hong Kong Airport Authority and ferry terminal operators have also held joint AI exercises with the government and industry stakeholders.

¶10. (U) Hong Kong also conducts regular public awareness programs on AI through television, press and street advertising. It has published AI preparation guidelines in Chinese (both traditional and simplified) and English. The HKG,s AI factsheet is available online on the HWFB website (www.hwfb.gov.hk) in 22 languages, including those of Hong Kong,s minority populations (Urdu, Nepali, Vietnamese, Hindi, Thai, Tagalog, Indonesian, and a variety of others).

Collaboration with mainland China, Macau and others

¶10. (SBU) Hong Kong signed agreements with the Mainland and Macau to promote intelligence sharing prior to and in the event of an outbreak. The HKG also conducts joint exercises with Macau and mainland China to test the communication and response systems among the three jurisdictions. Yau stated that coordination with the mainland has improved, particularly on the local level with Guangdong province. Collaboration with Macau is also very good, although Yau informed Econoff that she remains concerned that there were only two hospitals in Macau to deal with a potential human outbreak. The Macau Special Administrative Region government, with its much smaller infrastructure, also appears to lack the same level of human resources as the HKG in managing the AI threat. Nevertheless, Yau predicted that Macau &is in fine shape, so long as neighboring Zhuhai does not have a major outbreak.⁸ (NOTE: Post plans further AI outreach with the Macau and a separate report on Macau AI preparations in the new year.)

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¶11. (SBU) Hong Kong also sends infectious disease experts to places that have experienced AI outbreaks to study local responses and provide assistance. In the region, the HKG remains concerned about the ability of some of its neighbors to respond to a pandemic. Yau cited Indonesia as a country of particular concern.
Cunningham